

# 1

## Test Pattern

Television's burden is that it's ubiquitous. It's so common to our social and cultural lives that we treat it with contempt. Often described as the poor man's cinema, radio with pictures or electronic newsprint, it is, however, more important than such a half-baked epithet implies. It watches us watching us. Fundamental to any understanding of ourselves in a modern world, it works on many and complex levels. From flogging fake gold chains on the Shopping Channel to Jacob Bronowski lifting ashes from a sodden pit inside the fence at Auschwitz, television comes at us as a conversation with the past, present and future.

At its essence, television is simply a way for people to see themselves. At its best it delivers very human promises. This is the way things are. This is the way things could be. It is a vital tool in the myth of progress and the authenticity of democracy, another part of the universal human experience, open to abuse and wonder.

For almost 80 years, television's arm has reached around the globe. Bhutan, the last country on earth

to adopt television, signed on in June 1999. With each technological advance it gets harder to imagine the changes waiting to hatch, except that they will be faster, more mobile and become increasingly second nature. Whether it's free-to-air, delivered by cable, internet or mobile phones, television grows in its sophistication as a means to inform, entertain and educate. It's also a way to make money and so has to be appreciated for its diversity, as we look down the parallel but often diverging paths of public and commercial broadcasting. Whether we see it as Huxley's soma or as Eisenstein's baby carriage of revolution, it's impossible to think of modern life without television.

## 2

### Television Revisited

**T**elevision was invented at least twice. An electromechanical system, patented by John Logie Baird, was the first system to work reliably. It was used by the BBC in the first ever public broadcast on 6 September 1929. Those broadcasts were beamed to London retailers on the afternoon of that day in order to catch customers on their way home from work, the idea being that stimulated sales would help get the medium on its feet. The first pictures were of a little light opera. Sales were slow. Baird's system was

eventually discontinued in February 1937, when an all-electronic system became available.<sup>1</sup>

The inventor of a purely electronic means of recording, transmitting and receiving images and sound through the ether was patented in 1926, just before the Great Depression, by the Hungarian genius, Kálmán Tihanyi.<sup>2</sup> His system, which used cathode ray tubes and light-sensitive coatings of phosphorous to send and receive signals, attracted attention in the United States and, after a series of court battles, the patents were finally purchased by RCA in 1938, at the very time the motion-picture industry was reaching its technical and artistic zenith (with films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Citizen Kane*). With added refinements by American inventor Philo Farnsworth, Tihanyi's system was developed by RCA in their laboratories by the Russian engineer V. K. Zworykin. After the Second World War this system was accepted as the standard and is only now giving way to technical innovations of the digital age.

On 1 July 1941, the Federal Communications Commission licensed two commercial networks, NBC and CBS, to begin transmission in New York. Six months later, when Japan invaded Pearl Harbour, the sale of television receivers was suspended. By war's end, the great divide had opened up. The Americans were deeply concerned with the commercial aspects of those little screens in every home. They saw television as a constantly revolving banner for advertising, a flickering billboard separated by chunks of variety, quiz shows or crime drama. The British attitude was very different: the airwaves belonged to the people.